Alcohol Problems and the Differentiation of Partner, Stranger, and General Violence

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To explore the relationship between alcohol problems and physical violence with partners and strangers, 457 college men and 958 college women with low, intermediate, or high scores on the Short Michigan Alcohol Screening Test reported conflict tactics on the Conflict Tactics Scale in the past year to and by partners and strangers. More men than women had high alcohol problems scores. Men with alcohol problems were more likely than other men to commit violence toward strangers or to partners and strangers. However, men with alcohol problems were not more likely than other men to commit violence toward partners only. Among women, alcohol problems had little relationship to committing violence or being the victim of violence.

Keywords: alcohol; partner violence; stranger violence; general violence

Several relationships between alcohol use and the commission of physical aggression have been reported with some consistency. Reviewing the literature concerning risk factors for partner physical aggression among men, Riggs, Caulfield, and Street (2000) concluded that alcohol is a risk marker for partner physical aggression. Reviewing the literature concerning the relationship between alcohol and several types of physical aggression, Lipsey, Wilson, Cohen, and Derzon (1997) commented that “no firm conclusion can be drawn about whether alcohol plays a causal role in [violent] behavior” (p. 245). The relationship between alcohol and the violent victimization of men, particularly by partners, has received less attention. Graham and West (2001) noted that alcohol is related to the violent victimization of men by strangers. Porcerelli et al. (2003) reported more violent victimization by partners and strangers among men and women with alcohol problems than men and women with no alcohol problems among family practice patients.
Women’s violence and alcohol use has been studied less often than men’s violence. The relationship between alcohol problems and women’s violence toward partners is described as equivocal by Riggs et al. (2000). Women with alcohol problems are more likely to be violently victimized by their partners than other women, perhaps because their partners are also more likely to have alcohol problems and/or perhaps because women who have been violently victimized by partners develop alcohol use problems (e.g., Magdol et al., 1997; Tollestrup et al., 1999). However, some studies have found no relationship between alcohol problems and violent victimization among women (e.g., Plichta, 1996). With respect to violence toward strangers, Bushman (1997) concluded in a meta-analysis of the literature that alcohol has a larger effect on aggression by men than by women.

There is growing recognition in the partner violence literature that men who are violent toward their partners are not a homogenous group but include some men who are violent only toward their partners and some who are violent toward their partners and toward nonpartners. Men who are violent toward partners and nonpartners commit more severe physical aggression toward their partners than men who are violent only toward their partners (Hamberger, Lohr, Bonge, & Tolin, 1996; Holtzworth-Munroe, Mehan, Herron, Rehm, & Stuart, 2000; Kandel-Englander, 1992; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Huss, & Ramsey, 2000; Shields, McCall, & Hanneke, 1983). Some research shows that general and nonpartner physical aggression by men are related to antisocial features and alcohol problems (Cogan, Porcerelli, & Dromgoole, 2001; Kandel-Englander, 1992), whereas partner physical aggression is not (Cogan, Porcerelli, Sharp, & Ballinger, 2001).

We planned the current work to directly compare differences between men and women low, intermediate, or high in alcohol problems and the commission of violence toward partners only, strangers only, or partners and strangers. We also compare differences between men and women low, intermediate, or high in alcohol problems and violent victimization by partners only, strangers only, or partners and strangers. Our intent is to explore alcohol problems as a feature that may differentiate between violence toward partners only and violence toward partners and strangers.

Method

Participants

The participants included 482 men and 997 women enrolled in beginning psychology classes at a large southwestern university during three
academic semesters who were between age 18 and 24 years, had been in a relationship with a partner during the previous year, and completed the measures described below. The mean age of the participants was 18.7 years. Most participants were White non-Hispanic (85.5%), 12% were Hispanic, 2.2% were Black, and less than 1% were Other. Most were single (94.4%), 2.7% were married, 1.2% were cohabiting, 1.0% were separated or divorced, and .6% described themselves as Other. Most were freshmen (78.0%), 14.6% were sophomores, 5.4% were juniors, 2.8% were seniors, and .6% were classified as Other. Data were discarded from eight men and nine women who did not respond to four or more Conflict Tactics Scale-to Partners items, from 14 men and 26 women who did not respond to four or more Conflict Tactics Scale-to Strangers items, and from three men and four women who did not respond to two or more Short Michigan Alcohol Screening Test (SMAST) items. The final number of participants included 457 men and 958 women.

Materials

Each participant completed a brief demographic measure with questions about sex, age, race and ethnicity, marital status, and academic classification and completed the SMAST, the Conflict Tactics Scale—Partners and the Conflict Tactics Scale—Strangers, described below.

Short Michigan Alcohol Screening Test (SMAST). The SMAST (Selzer, Vinokur, & van Rooijen, 1975) is a 13-item self-report questionnaire for alcoholism screening. The SMAST is an often-used screening measure with good psychometric properties. Respondents indicate yes or no to each item (e.g., “Are you able to stop drinking when you want to?”). To limit problems with response bias, three items are reverse scored. The SMAST has a correlation of .97 with the 25-item Michigan Alcohol Test, suggesting that these 13 items are as effective as the 25-item version for screening purposes (Selzer et al., 1975). Selzer et al. (1975) found good internal consistency reliability, with a coefficient alpha of .95, and criterion validity, with correlations of .83 and .94 with clinician diagnoses of alcoholism in two different groups of people. Participants responding to zero or one item in the direction of alcohol problems were classified as being “low” in alcohol problems. Participants responding to two items in the direction of alcohol problems were classified as “intermediate” with respect to alcohol problems. Participants responding to three or more items in the direction of alcohol problems were classified as “high” in alcohol problems (Selzer et al., 1975).
Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS). The CTS (Straus, 1979) is an 18-item self-report measure of things that might happen between people in conflict situations. The CTS is a standard and often-used measure of partner violence (Straus, 1989). Respondents report what they have done to others and what others have done to them. Items range from Item 1 (“Discussed the issue calmly”) to 18 (“Used a knife or gun”). Respondents indicate whether each item occurred never, once, twice, 3-5 times, 6-10 times, 11-20 times, or more than 20 times in the past year. There is also a response category for don’t know. The CTS-to Partners has been subject to factor analysis by several investigators, who have often found either three or four factors (Reasoning, Verbal Aggression, and Physical Aggression that often separates into mild and severe subscales; Ballinger, 2000; Caulfield & Riggs, 1992; Pan, Neidig, & O’Leary, 1994; Straus, 1979; TenVergert, Kingma, & Gillespie, 1990). Internal consistency has been reported for Reasoning, Verbal Aggression, and Physical Aggression for husband-to-wife data (.42 to .50, .62 to .80, and .69 to .88, respectively) and wife-to-husband data (.43 to .51, .76 to .79, and .79 to .82, respectively) by Straus (1989).

The CTS-to Strangers has been reported by Boone and Flint (1988) and by Cogan, Porcerelli, and Dromgoole (2001). Ballinger (2000) concluded based on the factor analysis that the CTS-to Strangers and CTS-by Strangers to and by men and women each includes four factors: Reasoning (Items 1-3; e.g., Item 1, “Discussed the issue calmly”), Verbal Aggression (Items 4-10; e.g., Item 4, “Insulted or swore at the other one”), Physical Aggression-mild (Items 11-13; e.g., Item 11, “Threw something at the other one”), and Physical Aggression-severe (Items 14-18; e.g., item 14, “Kicked, bit, or hit with a fist.” We have combined the two physical aggression subscales into one scale of physical violence.

To study the validity of the CTS, the reports of partners have been compared and found to agree more on the presence or absence of items and less on the frequency of occurrence of items (reviewed by Straus, 1989). Evidence for concurrent validity of the CTS-to Strangers was provided by Boone and Flint (1988), who found that CTS Reasoning, Verbal Aggression, and Physical Aggression directed toward friends and directed toward strangers correlated significantly with the corresponding scales of the Buss-Durkee Hostility Inventory (Buss & Durkee, 1957).

Four versions of the CTS were included in the current study: CTS-to Partners, CTS-by Partners, CTS-to Strangers, and CTS-by Strangers. The most extreme item that the respondent reported on each version was identified and grouped as Reasoning (Items 1-3), Verbal Aggression (Items 4-10), or Physical Aggression (Items 11-18). In the current data, the average internal consistency
Cronbach’s alpha [raw]) was lowest for Reasoning to and by partners (both were .67 for women and .73 for men) and was .82 or greater for Verbal Aggression and Physical Aggression to and by partners and strangers by men and women. Respondents were grouped into those who reported that they committed no violence toward either partners or strangers, committed violence toward partners only, committed violence toward strangers only, or committed violence toward partners and strangers. Respondents were similarly grouped into four groups based on reports of on violent victimization by others.

**Design and Procedure**

The participants responded to the questionnaires as part of a group of self-report measures included in a survey in which all interested students in beginning psychology classes had the option of participating. The measures, along with measures being used by other researchers, were presented to groups of about 70 participants at a time in large lecture halls. The order of the measures was counterbalanced. Participants recorded their responses on optical scanner sheets, and participant’s names were not on the response sheets. The total time required for participants to complete all of the measures was approximately 1 hour.

Participation in the survey was voluntary and was one of several ways of meeting a class requirement. The treatment of participants was in accordance with the “Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct” of the American Psychological Association (1992), and the procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the university.

The data were analyzed with ANOVA tests for continuous variables and chi-square tests for categorical variables.

**Results**

**Sex Differences**

There were differences between men and women in the frequency of SMAST groups, $\chi^2(3, N = 1415) = 30.76, p < .0001$. Follow-up tests showed no differences in the number of men and women with low or intermediate SMAST scores, $\chi^2(1, N = 1193) = 2.12, p = .15$. More men than women had high than low SMAST scores, $\chi^2(1, N = 1132) = 30.78, p < .0001$. The SMAST information is shown in Table 1.

Differences between men and women in CTS-to Partners, CTS-by Partners, CTS-to Strangers, and CTS-by Strangers were tested with four
χ² tests. When the χ² test showed significant differences, follow-up χ² tests were carried out to test differences in the number of men and women whose most extreme report was on the CTS Violence factor as compared with the number whose most extreme CTS report was on the Reasoning or Verbal Aggression factors.

For CTS-to Partners, χ²(2, N = 1415) = 25.89, p < .0001. Follow-up tests showed no significant differences between the number of men and women who were violent toward their partners versus those who were not, χ²(1, N = 1415) = 2.65, p = .10. For CTS-by Partners, χ²(2, N = 1415) = 17.13, p < .0001. A follow-up test showed that more men than women reported being the victims of violence by their partners, χ²(1, N = 1415) = 13.43, p = .0002. For CTS-to Strangers, χ²(2, N = 1415) = 124.93, p < .0001. A follow-up test showed that more men than women reported directing violence toward strangers, χ²(1, N = 1415) = 124.72, p < .0001. For CTS-by Strangers, χ²(2, N = 1415) = 95.77, p < .0001. A follow-up test showed that more men than women reported being the victims of violence by strangers, χ²(1, N = 1415) = 105.38, p < .0001). The CTS information is shown in Table 2.

Alcohol and conflict tactics. To extend consideration of partner versus general violence, the percentage of men and women low, intermediate, and high in SMAST alcohol problems reporting committing no violence toward either partners or strangers (C–None), violence toward partners only (C-PO), violence toward strangers only (C-SO), or violence toward partners and strangers (C-PS) were compared, shown in Table 3. The percentages of men and women low, intermediate, or high in alcohol problems who were the victims of violence by neither partners nor strangers (V-None), violence by partners only (V-PO), violence by strangers only (V-SO), or violence by partners and strangers (V-PS) are shown in Table 4. Differences in the overall frequencies

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SMAST alcohol problems items</th>
<th>Men n (%)</th>
<th>Women n (%)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low (0 or 1 item)</td>
<td>258 (56.5)</td>
<td>652 (68.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate (2 items)</td>
<td>93 (20.4)</td>
<td>190 (19.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (3 or more items)</td>
<td>106 (23.2)</td>
<td>116 (12.1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2
Most Extreme Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) Factor Reported by Men (N = 457) and Women (N = 958)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>To Partners*</th>
<th>By Partners*</th>
<th>To Strangers*</th>
<th>By Strangers*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasoning</td>
<td>48 (10.5)</td>
<td>36 (3.8)</td>
<td>67 (7.0)</td>
<td>61 (13.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Aggression</td>
<td>288 (63.0)</td>
<td>628 (65.6)</td>
<td>642 (67.0)</td>
<td>574 (59.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Aggression</td>
<td>121 (26.5)</td>
<td>294 (30.7)</td>
<td>249 (26.0)+</td>
<td>200 (20.9)+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .0001 for each of the four chi-square tests comparing differences between men and women. +p < .0002 for chi-square tests comparing differences between men and women for physical versus not physical as the most extreme report.
were significant for men for violence directed toward others, \( \chi^2(3, N = 457) = 27.09, p < .0001 \), and for men’s victimization by others, \( \chi^2(3, N = 457) = 19.34, p = .004 \). Follow-up chi-square analyses were carried out comparing the number of men low, high, or intermediate in alcohol problems who committed no violence (C-None), or who committed violence toward partners only (C-PO), strangers only (C-SO), or partners and strangers (C-PS). The number of men in the C-None and C-PO groups did not differ as a function of being low, high, or intermediate in alcohol problems, \( \chi^2(2, N = 248) = 1.32, p = .52 \). The number of men in the C-None and C-SO groups did differ as a function of being low, high, or intermediate in alcohol problems, \( \chi^2(2, N = 336) = 14.58, p = .0007 \), and as can be seen in Table 4, men were more likely to commit violence toward strangers as alcohol problems increased. The number of men in the C-None and C-PS groups did differ as a function of being low, high, or intermediate in alcohol problems, \( \chi^2(2, N = 319) = 20.05, p < .0001 \), and as can be seen in Table 4, men intermediate or high in alcohol problems were more likely to commit violence toward both partners and strangers (C-PS).

Differences in the overall frequencies for women were not significant, \( \chi^2(3, N = 958) = 8.52, p = .20 \).

**Discussion**

Several findings in the current work replicate findings often reported by others. More men than women had high SMAST alcohol problems scores. Most of the men and women reported that reasoning or verbal aggression was the most extreme conflict reported to and by partners and strangers. The differences between men and women in reporting the commission of violence toward their partners were not significant; however, more men than women reported being the victims of violence by their partners. Women are more often than men physically injured by partner violence (see Archer, 2000), and comparisons of more female-to-male and male-to-female partner violence are not without controversy. Men’s report of more violent victimization by partners than women’s report of violent victimization by partners in the present data is in harmony with the research literature (see Archer, 2000, and Fiebert, 1997, for reviews of the literature). Far more men than women reported committing violence toward strangers and being the victims of violence by strangers, which is commonplace in the literature (Chermack & Giancola, 1997; Graham & West, 2001; Lipsey et al., 1997).

We carried out the current work to explore the possibility that alcohol problems might be related to violence with strangers and not related to
violence with partners. The hypothesis of differential involvement of alcohol problems in stranger and partner violence led us to separate two types of partner violence that are often confounded. Some men are violent toward

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### Table 3

Number and Percentage of Men (N = 457) and Women (N = 958) With High, Intermediate, and Low Short Michigan Alcohol Screening Test (SMAST) Alcohol Problem Scores Who Did Not Commit Violence (C-None), Committed Violence Toward Partners Only (C-PO), Committed Violence Toward Strangers Only (C-SO), Toward Partners and Strangers (C-PS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low (n, %)</td>
<td>Intermediate (n, %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-None</td>
<td>150 (58.1)</td>
<td>38 (40.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-PO</td>
<td>16 (6.2)</td>
<td>3 (3.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-SO</td>
<td>53 (20.5)</td>
<td>25 (26.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-PS</td>
<td>39 (15.1)</td>
<td>27 (29.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low (n, %)</th>
<th>Intermediate (n, %)</th>
<th>High (n, %)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C-None</td>
<td>127 (49.2)</td>
<td>27 (30.1)</td>
<td>32 (30.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-PO</td>
<td>29 (11.2)</td>
<td>12 (12.9)</td>
<td>12 (11.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-SO</td>
<td>51 (19.8)</td>
<td>29 (31.2)</td>
<td>28 (26.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-PS</td>
<td>51 (19.8)</td>
<td>24 (25.8)</td>
<td>34 (32.1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Table 4

Number and Percentage of Men (N = 457) and Women (N = 958) High, Intermediate, and Low on Short Michigan Alcohol Screening Test (SMAST) Alcohol Problem Scores Who Were Not Victims of Violence by Others (V-None), Victims of Violence Only by Partners (V-PO), Victims of Violence Only by Strangers (V-SO), or Victims of Violence by Partners and Strangers (V-PS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low (n, %)</td>
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<tr>
<td>V-None</td>
<td>127 (49.2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>V-PO</td>
<td>29 (11.2)</td>
<td>12 (12.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V-SO</td>
<td>51 (19.8)</td>
<td>29 (31.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V-PS</td>
<td>51 (19.8)</td>
<td>24 (25.8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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their partners only, and some men are violent toward their partners and
strangers. The current findings show, as predicted, that more men who com-
mit violence toward strangers or toward partners and strangers have alcohol
problems than men who are not violent, whereas few men who committed vio-
lected violence toward their partners only had alcohol problems. Among men, alcohol
problems successfully differentiate between the two types of partner violence.
Among women, on the other hand, alcohol use problems and the commission
of violence toward strangers occurred less often than they did among men and
alcohol problems did not differentiate between women who are violent toward
their partners and women who are violent to partners and strangers. The cur-
rent findings extend earlier work on violence by men (Cogan, Porcerelli, &
Dromgoole, 2001; Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2000; Kandel-Englander, 1992;
Porcerelli et al., 2003) to the less-often-explored area of violence by women.

In terms of implications for action, the findings indicate that when a man
is involved in violence, either by committing violence or by being a victim
of violence, assessment of alcohol problems may be important. Similarly,
when men are identified as having alcohol problems, an assessment for
involvement in violence may be important.

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